

The flip side of AIDS

By Andrew Nikiforuk

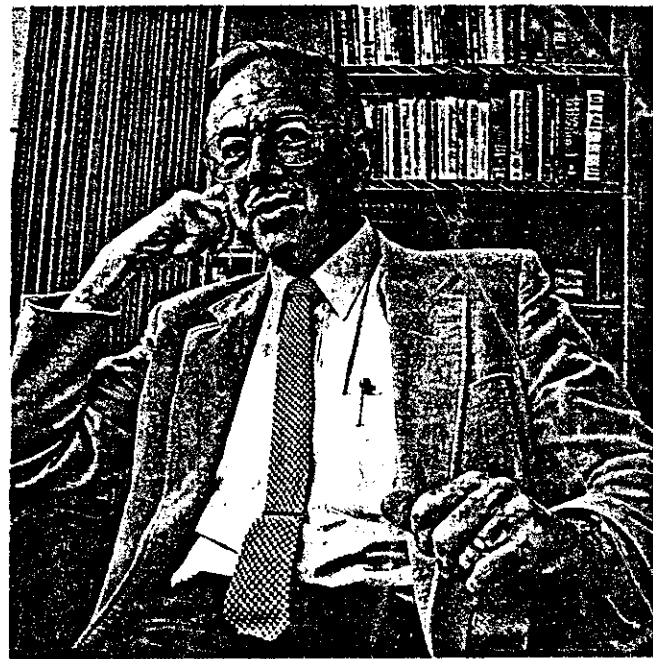
Sandra Stronge has lived as a virtual prisoner in her parents' Oshawa, Ont., home for the past year, the victim of a rare and debilitating condition which her doctors call "environmental illness." Her illness is also known as "20th-century disease" because Stronge, like a growing but still-uncounted number of fellow sufferers, is allergic to most modern synthetic materials, including plastics, pesticides, detergents and other chemicals. Indeed, since suffering mononucleosis three years ago, when she was 21, Stronge has reacted violently to exposure to many

eases. With rooms made of such safe materials as porcelain, steel and ceramic tiles, and with chemical pollution kept to a minimum with air filters and water purifiers, it is one of five facilities of its kind in the United States. But no similar treatment establishment exists in Canada, and Rae says his centre receives "a steady stream" of Canadians. Stronge's Canadian physician, Dr. Irvine Korman, a Willowdale, Ont., specialist in environmental medicine, said that in Canada many traditional doctors still refuse to recognize an illness such as Stronge's as legitimate.

Korman said that Stronge suffers from a complex disorder of her immune

ing of provincial ombudsman David Tickell, the province's department of social services has provided "special needs" funding to help three patients buy organic food and make their homes environmentally clean. But Stronge will not likely receive any government assistance for housing or long-term care when she eventually leaves the Fort Worth hospital.

Bob Ross, 35, a former Toronto florist with a wife and two children, is another Canadian facing similar problems. Unable to work for the past 10 months because of his debilitating sensitivities to food and chemicals, Ross has borrowed \$17,000 from his family to buy a "safe" house, free of such irritants as carpets, wallpaper, mould, pesticides or any form of petrochemicals. He said that some level of government should at least provide direct financial assistance to patients and counselling for their families to help them cope with a dis-



Stronge (left); Korman: the '20th-century disease' produces violent reactions to most modern synthetic materials

everyday things, including car exhaust, cigarette smoke and even many foods. The result was uncontrollable fainting spells or paralyzing depressions, and her condition had worsened so much by the beginning of this month that she could not drink anything but spring water nor eat any food at all. In grave danger of starving, Stronge was flown to a specially designed, chemical-free hospital unit in Fort Worth, Tex., where by late last week, on a diet of purified water and organic foods, she was in stable condition.

A prominent Texas cardiovascular surgeon, Dr. William Rea, founded the Environmental Control Unit at Fort Worth's Northeast Community Hospital last October to treat a growing number of patients with environmental dis-

system, combined with an inability of her body to cleanse itself of toxic chemicals such as pesticides. He described the condition as "the flip side of AIDS"—the acquired immune deficiency syndrome which has stricken thousands of North Americans. Said Korman: "These people's immune systems hyperreact, whereas AIDS patients' underreact."

There is still no reliable data on the numbers of people suffering from serious environmental illnesses, but Korman estimated that 85 per cent of the population is highly sensitive, or allergic, to at least one kind of food or chemical. Rae said that nearly 2,000 physicians are currently working in the field in the United States. In Canada only one province, Saskatchewan, has even tacitly recognized the condition. At the urg-

ease that he calls "a nightmare."

For their part, Stronge's parents have so far spent more than \$30,000 to keep their daughter alive. The Ontario government turned down their application for a medical allowance, and Sandra's mother, Shirley, said that she is bitter about the absence of support. "It is a horrendous thing for a family to go through," she added. "We have done everything you could think of, and then you have to go off to another country because your government does not recognize the fact that this illness exists." But friends of the Stronges have set up a trust fund to raise money to create an environment cleaner than their present home. For Sandra Stronge, it may represent her only chance to lead a near-normal life. ☛